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THE GREAT TRADITION—MADAME DE SÉVIGNÉ

BY FLORENCE LEFTWICH RAVENEL

MARIE DE RABUTIN-CHANTAL, Marquise de Sévigné, has been the subject of a voluminous literature. She never wrote a line for print herself, but as soon as her tireless pen was laid aside, her keen eyes—done at last with their ready smiles and tears—closed upon this world, forthwith collectors, editors, biographers, antiquarians seized upon her as their lawful prey, and from her day even until ours the stream of publication has never entirely failed.

The remotest branches of her family before and after her own time—in Brittany, in Burgundy, in Provence; the details of her daily life in sickness and in health; her friends, her children, her theology, her morals—everything that touched her, however remotely, has turned, it would appear, not to gold, but to ink. One of the very few writers who absolutely did not know how to be dull, she has inspired some of the heaviest and dreariest pages ever penned, and the long list of volumes on most divergent themes, which bear her name upon their title-pages, might suggest to the uninitiated reader of catalogues and publishers' lists that French science and scholarship would have fared very ill in the seventeenth century but for the omnipresent succor of the inexhaustible and apparently omniscient Marquise.

Of course we know very well, on the contrary, that Marie de Rabutin had no more than a ladylike interest in the problems of archæology or medicine, for example, and that her very commonplace cure at Vichy offers no new features to the student of rheumatic gout. If all these many men of many minds have laid greedy hands upon her name and her prestige, to give currency to their own theories and inventions, it is rather—is it not?—that they all find in this woman a certain power of universal appeal, which makes of

her, in a special sense, a representative of her age, her sex, and her country.

It is asserted by a famous historian that no true and adequate portrait of Julius Cæsar, either written, carved, or painted, has been preserved—or probably ever existed. And the explanation suggested is not that the great man was subtle, secretive, mysterious, beyond the common measure of men, but rather that in him the human and manly qualities were all so evenly developed, so nicely balanced and proportioned, that he was for his contemporaries, and has remained for posterity, rather a type of manhood than an individual man. And such in her smaller scope and degree might have been the lot of Marie de Sévigné. A great Frenchwoman, a great aristocrat, a great writer, a great friend—her individual physiognomy might have remained always a little vague and blurred had not this smooth and shining surface been broken by one blessed imperfection, one saving defect. The mother of Françoise de Grignan, blindly partial, doating, often unreasonable, steps down from her niche high up on the classic stairway, and walks with us the common earth, climbing with painful steps the *via dolorosa* appointed for mothers since time began.

The family of the Rabutin-Chantal was of an old but somewhat obscure nobility, not unmixed with bourgeois stock—a mingling of red blood with blue by no means uncommon even then, and not unimportant, by the way, when we come to take account of Marie's robust virtues and plebeian abhorrence of debt. She was born, an only child and an heiress, in 1626, at her father's town residence in Paris, and her life covers three-fourths of the great century.

For her good or evil fortune she was left an orphan at about six years of age, and at ten was placed formally under the guardianship of her maternal uncle, the Abbé de Coulanges, who transferred his young ward to his own home, the Abbey house at Livry—a charming spot deep buried in vines and hidden in tall trees, though but a few miles from Paris. Here pure air, an out-of-door life, and the absence of all undue constraint or excitement made firm the foundations of that soundness of body and mind which were to be not the least precious part of little Marie's dowry. While in the interval the good, if somewhat unclerical abbé, was taking exceedingly good care of his niece's fortune, buying fertile acres, collecting rents, and piling up the

bright gold *écus* to be reinvested in safe and lucrative enterprises—making her indeed, irrespective of her personal graces, one of the best *parties* in France.

Nor did he forget or neglect the training of her mind, and here, too, whether by chance or intention, the originality of his methods is equaled only by the happiness of their effect. The systematic education of women is not—has never been—in the French tradition, and in the seventeenth century the orthography and punctuation even of queens and princesses made correspondence with them a painful honor; though as such great ladies rarely opened a book themselves, they were not reminded unpleasantly of their own eccentricities of style. But Marie de Rabutin, thanks, perhaps, to her comparatively modest rank, was destined to receive an instruction uncommonly thorough and comprehensive for any period. To dance and sing and make her *révérences* with grace and elegance—all that was a matter of course. It was not without precedent that a girl should read romances and revel in the play; but Ménage and Chapelain, the two pedantic and in some ways rather ridiculous tutors of her uncle's choice, made a far more sweeping innovation when they gave this little lady a Latin so sound and sufficient that Tacitus and Vergil were to her always a satisfaction and delight. They added to that the Italian of Tasso, the Spanish of Lope de Vega, and—another lesson also, more precious than all the rest—into this fresh, vigorous, and open mind they instilled the love of good books.

The well-groomed and disciplined Seventeenth Century Muse could not impart the love of Nature, in our modern sense, and yet in some odd, intuitive, unreasoned fashion Marie de Rabutin was all her life a lover of the woods and streams. The birds sing, the flowers bloom, spring comes and autumn passes, visibly and audibly, in many of her letters written from Livry, and I am persuaded that the oldest and tallest of the trees that arch the straight avenues at Les Rochers must still be mindful of her once familiar presence as she moved to and fro in their shadow, in joy or sorrow, under sun or moonlight, finding unconsciously in the serene beauty of these mute, insensate things something of that consolation and relief that were to lie unuttered for another hundred years. And as for friendship—to her who had already so rich a portion was added this also, a sincere and cordial liking for her fellow-men. Marie

de Rabutin's interest in men and women, high and low, great and small, never failed; while for her friends her love was a treasure-house indeed, inexhaustible in faith and patience, loyalty and service, through sickness and health, through good and especially through evil report.

Surely never had teachers and guardian a richer and more fertile soil, nor did any reap a fuller and easier harvest from their wise and thrifty planting. By what strange and perverse misfortune was it, then, that all their tact, all their foresight and wisdom, deserted these zealous and well-meaning counselors when a few years later the question of her marriage arose? Here at least must be inscribed a signal and quite undisputed failure of the old régime. With a wide range of choice and every advantage of youth, beauty, and fortune, the prize fell promptly and without protest to Henri, Marquis of Sévigné. Handsome, light-hearted, and fascinating, and of rank higher than her own, this young man might well have charmed the young girl's fancy had she been free to follow her own will; but he had all the faults of his age and position, without even the countervailing grace of a hearty affection for his bride. "He loved often and indiscriminately," writes Marie's sharp-tongued cousin Bussy, "but never by any chance any one so lovable as his wife." And—a worse sin against her from a contemporary standpoint—he wasted her substance in riotous living.

Of the Sévigné's married life we hear little—surprisingly little when we recall how much we know of the wife's later career. But in these eight unrecorded years something very important happened to Marie de Sévigné—there were born to her a daughter and a son. The son, Charles, at Les Rochers, the Sévigné home in Brittany; the daughter, Françoise Marguerite, a year or two earlier, though, oddly enough, neither the place nor the date of this capital event has ever been ascertained. And then in 1651, just in time, perhaps, to rescue his image from complete defacement in his wife's memory, the Marquis of Sévigné was killed—in a duel—and in a quarrel as trivial and fantastic as his whole career. Peace to his ashes! He was a poor, slight creature. A figure of too gallant an outside, perhaps, to be quite disdained, and too unsubstantial to arouse our wrath, he had yet brought to his wife the deepest and sweetest experiences of life. He left her embar-

passed, indeed, in fortune, so that years of retrenchment and economy and infinite calculations on the part of the good old Abbé were needed to rebuild her inheritance, but rich in the treasures of maternal love which was thereafter to absorb all the energies of her soul. Moreover, her resolve not to replace him—to run no further risks with the life and the fortune to which her children had now the strongest claim—this decision, so widely canvassed in her day, was promptly and cheerfully taken, and adhered to without serious violence to her feelings or desires. For this woman's nature, so variously and bounteously endowed, was not without its arctic zone—a region where the sun might glisten with illusory brightness sometimes, but the ice never melted, even under the fierce ardors of besieging suitors' attacks. And perhaps, after all, there was the sting of truth in Bussy's malicious gibes when he insinuated that his cousin's irreproachable conduct and spotless reputation would have been more admirable still had they not been made unduly easy by a sluggish temperament and a cold heart. But this was a hard saying, and Bussy had to take it back on his knees.

Bussy, no doubt, was jealous as well as spiteful, for both as wife and widow Marie de Rabutin had many adorers—Bussy himself, of course, Cardinal Retz, the Chancellor Fouquet, the great Turenne, and other famous names besides, concerning whom I am fain to conclude, after mature reflection, that she was nevertheless better free of them all. The love they offered her—so casually lavish—was not worth even one of her ready tears. And so, the treasure of her heart, love and tears beyond counting, was reserved for Françoise; for, from the first, Mme. de Sévigné discriminated between her children. She made apparently no effort after maternal impartiality, and the usual rôles of son and daughter seem here to have been oddly reversed. Charles was a delightful fellow, of an infinite tact and delicacy, and firmly convinced of his haughty sister's better right to all the good things of life—including their mother's love. In health he was a genial, spirited, most entertaining companion, with a love of books as strong as hers, and a critical judgment far more invariably right; in sickness a skilful, devoted, and sympathetic nurse. And yet his mother (who perhaps knew him better than we, after all) had always a difficulty in taking him seriously in any relation. Even his

dissipation, his many light loves, cannot be said to have troubled her peace of mind half so much as the fading roses on her daughter's cheek, or the uncertain, often receding, date of her return to Paris. When the young man's health gave way—a result, in part, of the hardships and exposures of his military campaigns, but largely also of the life of disorder he had lived, Mme. de Sévigné was grieved, anxious, affectionate, but always with a sort of ironical detachment, a half-indulgent disdain, very, *very* different from the passion of whole-hearted tenderness which met and responded to every change of mood in her idolized, too often unresponsive Françoise. It was the age of absolute monarchy, and this daughter reigned to the end with undisputed sway over her mother's heart and life.

Matre pulchra filia pulchrior, as she was, Françoise de Sévigné's first formal *révérence* at St.-Germain was followed by all sorts of brilliant fêtes, masques, and ballets in which her rôle both as beauty and as accomplished dancer was conspicuous and flattering. It was a youthful court and had not yet lost its spontaneous gaiety and lightness of heart; corrupt already, no doubt, but far less callous and stereotyped in its sins than it was afterward to become. Louis himself was but twenty-three, and recently married to a queen younger still, toward whom he maintained as yet all the forms of gallant devotion; while for another, fairer still, he reserved his sincerer and tenderer observances. The lovely Louise de la Valière was not yet officially the King's mistress, and the little haze of romance that still lingered, we are told, around the royal wooing gave a certain morning charm—almost like that of innocence, to all their elaborate merrymakings—a sort of carnival of youth and love and joy, offered by the lover to his beloved.

Ah! in 1660 it was worth while to be young and noble, worth while even being packed into most insufficient and comfortless quarters in the old yet unmodernized palace of Versailles! For in those days Molière was directing the production of his own plays and Lulli presiding over the musical interludes and ballets; and—who knows?—it might have been the incomparable good fortune of some of us to assist on one of these glorious evenings with the other exalted guests at the first performance of "*Tartuffe*"! To Mme. de Sévigné, as to thousands of other French men and

women, this might well seem the crowning moment of all time, and she may be excused, I think, for a certain motherly pride and exultation—keener and more naïve in her, we may be sure, than any emotion which stirred the tranquil breast of Françoise—to find her idolized daughter of this most brilliant group.

But despite her brilliant beauty and substantial *dot*, Mlle. de Sévigné was but little sought in marriage. Two or three candidates, possible if not brilliant, must be rejected, and when the Count de Grignan—twice a widower and by no means a youthful Adonis—at last presented himself, one cannot resist the impression that mother and daughter held out welcoming hands to him as to a deliverer. Mlle. de Sévigné was handsome, she was even beautiful, no doubt, but of that inward grace of which beauty, to be effective, to be really successful, indeed, must be but the outward and visible sign—of that magical quality which we call charm—this daughter of the most charming of women had not a trace.

Her marriage was showy rather than safe, after all, for de Grignan, though of a distinguished family, was not rich, and his fortune was subject to the exorbitant demands of his official position as Lieutenant-Governor of Languedoc, as well as to his own love of display. But mother and daughter were prepared to make the best of his situation as of himself, and exert all their influence to secure for him a promotion in the form of some office at court. His actual appointment to the Lieutenant-Governorship of Provence, with the duty of residing in his province, was not made public till some time after the marriage, and to the elder woman at least was an overwhelming blow. There was no help for it—the parting of the ways was at hand. Eighteen months had elapsed, meanwhile, and it was not until after the birth of her first daughter, unwelcome, unloved little Marie Blanche, that Mme. de Grignan, with mingled feelings, no doubt, compounded of relief at escaping from her mother's too watchful, too absorbing and demonstrative love and care, and a certain vague remorse and regret at leaving that mother disconsolate—actually set out to follow her husband to their distant home.

And now at forty-five, the great active occupation and interest of her life consummated and done with, Mme. de Sévigné's career may be said to begin. Of course, she was

no novice in letter-writing—her long, if irregular, intercourse with Bussy, her letters to her cousins, the Coulanges, to Mme. de Lafayette, and to others also show her already in full possession of her talent. But these letters, these correspondents, were, all except Bussy, episodic and by the way; not till she lost her idol did the need of self-expression become urgent. Henceforth, and for twenty-five years, with the intervals of her visits to the Grignans and their sojourn in Paris, the tide of mother love and longing set steadily toward the arid, wind-swept plains of Provence and the stern and stately halls which sheltered and imprisoned her Countess, together with all the patriarchal tribe of Grignans, small and great.

The woman revealed—one might almost say, exposed to us—in these letters was not, was never supposed to be, a candidate for sainthood. Perhaps the only great quality which she possessed in common with the most eminent saints—St. Teresa, for example, and St. Francis—was her broad and tolerant humor with its accompanying capacity to adapt herself to all sorts of people and situations, and to make the best of that irrepressible human nature—of which, by the way, neither she nor the saints had too high an opinion. But all manner of follies and frailties linger in this buoyant and many-sided nature. Hers, for example, the cheerful hardness of heart, the serene disregard of all classes except her own, which made the lot of the noble under the old régime so comfortable and so perilous. Of all *classes*, I say, for in her relation to individuals, servants, dependants, inferiors, even animals, she seems to have been indulgent and kind to the point of soft-heartedness, and it is certain from many allusions that she was well loved and faithfully served all her life. In all feminine arts and wiles, moreover, long since denied and disavowed, if not entirely renounced, by the modern woman, Mme. de Sévigné is quite openly and joyously expert. Witness, for example, her frequent epistolary skirmishes with Bussy, whom, undoubtedly, she irritated and provoked with a zest only less keen than her pleasure in the ensuing reconciliation. She is indeed an adept in the flatterer's art, though she practises it not upon the hostile or indifferent, but only upon those whom she loves well enough to make the effort to please worth while. And if she lacks sometimes the charity that thinketh—and speaketh—no evil, it is impossible to treat

with rigor a failing to which are due such pen-pictures as those of Mlle. du Plessis and the fine ladies of Vitré and all the rest of the portrait-gallery made immortal by her delicious mockery. And, in further attenuation, it must be said that the evil she imputes is never of her own invention. "I hate and detest false news" is her frequent asseveration, and far more uniformly than any other writer of letters, memoirs, or journal of her day, Mme. de Sévigné looked at the life around her with the clear, sane, steady eyes of a sympathetic contemporary—penetrating but without rancor, and without personal ends to warp her judgment.

It is, perhaps, after all, her *esprit gaulois* that puts the severest strain upon the taste of a fastidious generation—and especially of its feminine half. It is futile to deny or belittle this vein. Mme. de Sévigné, like Bussy, like Molière and Lafontaine, dearly loved a *risqué* anecdote, a broad and salacious jest. I doubt if even her most scientific modern editors would venture upon an unexpurgated edition of her works for popular use. But—again by way of apology—hers was an age of incredible freedom of expression. The Hôtel de Rambouillet had done much toward refining both manners and language, but the familiar speech among the highest class, like the stairways and corridors of their noblest palaces, still harbored many an unclean thing. And those Rabelaisian episodes (few and brief, after all) which drop sometimes from her pen, won uproarious applause from her contemporaries and the easy pardon of even her modern French critics—the serious, low-spirited modern Gaul having yet this trait in common with his fathers. And, above all and through all, she is always interesting because she is always *alive*. This dead-and-gone old world of hers springs to life under her touch as infallibly as the young grass follows the drawing of the April sun. She has often to speak of commonplace, even sordid matters, in veiled and cryptic phrases, and of people, events, and things to modern ears remote and strange. She must even sometimes repeat the same tale to different correspondents; yet we follow on—puzzled, often disappointed, and sometimes even shocked; but never, *never* bored.

In this letter, for example, she overflows in complaint and lamentation over the slowness and uncertainty of the post—

her own intolerable anguish and suspense in waiting for news from Provence, and though we are assured of the result, yet we read on, conscious each time of a thrill of relief when we hear that the letters have arrived, the wished-for tidings been received. We are watching, too, as eagerly almost as poor homesick Françoise from her castle towers at Grignan for the gleam of some precious nugget of court news—the latest exploit, perhaps, of the King's ponderous, slow-moving armies, which, for all their splendid feats of individual daring and heroic leadership, seem yet to belong in many of their methods to the same school of warfare as the siege of Troy. Or, again, she flashes before the watcher's eager eye some delicate vignette after Watteau or Boucher; an intimate scene, perhaps, from royal antechamber or boudoir, or a tragi-comic episode from banquet-hall or ballroom, where the King, in the glory of brocade, jeweled buckles, and curled wig, offers his hand for the minuet to some lovely nymph whose coming greatness is reflected in his ardent eyes as well as in the ill-disguised chagrin of the reigning favorite and her unofficial court.

And so the years go by, the leaves are turned, one volume takes the place of another. It is no longer the young King nor the young court. There are pages of this chronicle that are like a solemn roll-call of the dead—Turenne, the Great Condé, Cardinal Retz, La Rochefoucauld, Mme. de Lafayette—and for one and all she has a fitting word, of farewell, of praise, of judgment, perhaps only of dismissal from this scene of their earthly triumph or defeat to that other tribunal where neither power nor rank, beauty nor influence, can avail or profit any more. And at the end—the last leaf turned, the last volume laid aside—having read, in all likelihood, the last lines Marie de Rabutin ever wrote, suddenly one comes to himself, as it were, with a start, realizing that he has so lived in her life that when at last she is gone he has grown old and wise with her years and her wisdom, and this world of her experience has become as real and vital and far more interesting than his own.

In 1690, her debts paid, her affairs in order at last, Mme. de Sévigné found herself free to follow her own desires. The last six years of her life were spent in closest companionship with her daughter and the young Pauline de Grignan, and in a happiness as complete as her vivid imagi-

nation, her anxious and tender heart, were capable of enjoying on earth. Little rubs there were still, no doubt, in their daily intercourse. Françoise was still herself, and it was not in her arid nature fully to satisfy her mother's absorbing love. Still, these years together, both in Provence and in Paris, were surely the best that life had to offer them both. With the lapse of time, too, it is easy to discern that both have changed; the daughter growing gentler, more considerate, with a clearer understanding of this great affection that from her birth had enwrapped her like an atmosphere—like an atmosphere, too, was subject to alternations of cloud and sunshine. And the mother, who could not be more loving, seems to have made a study of moderation and self-restraint. You see the years were passing over them both and they had both known sorrow, disappointment, and ingratitude.

The truth seems to be that none of the Sévigné's were good courtiers. Charles retired at an early age from the court and from the service, where, more or less by his own fault, promotion was for him clearly unattainable. He married a young girl of Brittany who had never been beyond her province, and settled himself at Les Rochers to lead the life of a cultivated, unambitious country gentleman. Mme. de Sévigné herself was always well received at court, where she made periodic appearances and had many warm admirers. But she was openly and consistently faithful always to old friends, even those marked with the stigma of royal displeasure, and—worse yet!—she was never able to regard with becoming seriousness the long line of court beauties who succeeded one another so swiftly in the King's favor. She actually allowed herself occasionally a jest at their expense, discreet but unmistakable, and if certain of her letters were opened and read by the police (as she sometimes suggests that they were) the persistent ill luck of herself and her children may perhaps be partially explained.

Something of the sadness, a little also of the peace and detachment of age, are upon this woman. In the later volumes of letters she speaks often of death and of those last things of whose verity and supreme importance no doubt seems ever to have crossed her mind, though she remained to the end of her life (she never could quite understand why) a sincere but only moderately devout Christian and Catholic. The austerity of Mme. de Lafayette's later

years were to Mme. de Sévigné admirable—worthy of all emulation—but quite beyond the range of her sober common sense, as of her tenacious affections, still firmly anchored to the earth. It was but fitting, then, that her last days should be spent at Grignan, honored, cherished, beloved almost to her heart's content. It was fitting also that she should die and be buried there, and it really matters little that the nature of her last illness is still uncertain, or even that Mme. de Grignan, herself dangerously ill, should have been absent from her dying bed. Mother and daughter understood each other fully at last, and certainly one could do no greater despite to this great maternal spirit than by ascribing to her beloved daughter petty motives, unworthy fears, cowardly scruples in this great and final emergency. Mme. de Grignan was always a great lady, and *noblesse oblige*.

Among so many fallen or tottering literary idols, it is pleasant to find Mme. de Sévigné's fame quite solid and intact after more than two hundred years; as a writer of familiar letters she still holds the first place. More unstudied, vivid, and picturesque than Cicero, her only rival among the ancients, she is more convincingly sincere than Voltaire, and as much more interesting than the charming but unfortunate Cowper, as the France of Louis XIV. is more interesting than the England of George III. Few and obscure, then, are the French critics or historians of literature who have not felt it due to their own glory, if not to hers, to attempt some sort of appreciation of Mme. de Sévigné's personality and talent. And yet, from her contemporary, Bussy, the cocksure, to the cordial but slightly condescending Ste.-Beuve and the dogmatic M. Faguet—not one of them, to my mind, has achieved a characterization entirely adequate and satisfying. Intensely of her own time, she is almost equally of ours, not only in her literary style, but in her thoughts and feelings, her attitude toward life, even to the little fads and fancies which make so large a part of civilized woman's world; and concerning this unequaled *modernness* of Mme. de Sévigné, the last word, I am persuaded, is yet to speak. Truly all the ends of the earth were come upon this woman. She stood at the very heart and center of the civilized world, and before her eyes the pageant of humanity in little unrolled itself day

by day, while by a happy gift of Destiny she had in herself the seeing eye, the understanding mind, the loving heart. Here are the two significant factors: the extraordinarily interesting and stimulating society in which she lived and her own sensitive, impressionable, expansive nature wherewith to see, feel, and reflect the experience of every-day living.

The French language of her day, moreover, already so much subtler, more polished and delicate than any contemporary tongue, offered her an instrument admirably fitted to her use, and in the traditions and standards of the classic period forming around her she found an ideal of both form and substance—a mold, in other words, which restrained and fortified her flexible, exuberant genius. It is more than doubtful whether in any other language, or even in France at any other time, a correspondence so voluminous, so unstudied, so intimate as hers could have possessed both the high literary quality and the human charm and interest which make Mme. de Sévigné's letters perennially fresh and young. And finally the outward stimulus was not lacking. The creature she loved best in the world, intercourse with whom was to her the very breath of life, was withdrawn from her by a distance of five hundred miles. Henceforth into her letters to her daughter Mme. de Sévigné wrote *herself*.

And this habit of complete self-expression and expansion—of thinking, feeling, and *living* on paper—grew, no doubt, by long indulgence, as did also that unfailing sense of form, the infinite variety of phrase, the freedom and flexibility of movement, and the marvelous verbal felicity which must always be the despair of her imitators. And sometimes when this light and facile pen of hers encounters a great theme—some tragic history of death, defeat, dishonor—suddenly in the grasp of a great emotion her period swells like that of Bossuet into a solemn, majestic funeral chant; or with La Bruyère, her irony, light and swift and deadly, searches the heart of hypocrisy, servility, and greed. Not often, though, this latter strain. Very rarely do the mystery and mockery of life disturb her naïve and womanly faith and wring from her such a cry from the depths as this: “You ask me, my dear child, if I still cling to life, and I must own to you that in spite of all the fiery trials through which we must pass here, I still find myself un-

reconciled to death. I deem myself so wretched to be forced to conclude the one experience by the other, that I suppose if I could go back and begin life again, I should be glad of the chance. I am launched upon an enterprise which I know not how to conduct, embarked upon life without my own consent, and yet, though I know I must soon make an end of it all, that very knowledge cuts me to the heart. What, after all, will my end be? By what door shall I go out? Shall I suffer a thousand dreadful pains, so that my last hours shall be dark with despair? How shall I stand before God? What shall I have to show Him? Shall I wait for the hour of terror, or my utmost need, before I draw nigh to my Maker? . . . What have I to hope? What to fear? Am I worthy of heaven? Have I deserved hell? Indeed, death appears to me so dreadful that I cry out against life, rather that it is the road toward death than because of the terrors with which it is strewn."

Here, at least, is no shallow optimism, no careless and frivolous spirit. This woman did not ignore the great gulf that yawned beside her narrow road. Only it was in her happy temper to look longest and most often at the flowers that grew along the margin of the abyss, at the sunshine that gilded the sharp-edged rocks—above all, at the men and women who, coming by many devious ways and on many different errands, all found themselves at last on the same highway, bound toward the same inevitable end.

And so it would appear that those dry-as-dust scholars, doctors, and antiquarians were not without a fair share of astuteness and worldly wisdom when, borrowing Marie de Sévigné's name and prestige, they gave, at least for the moment, a certain savor to their musty treatises and monographs. Her real connection with their subjects might be remote indeed, but her name, written across their title-pages, does sometimes, like a golden Bible text prefacing the sermon of a dull preacher, put life into those sluggish brains and tip their leaden pens with fire.

Two hundred years! It is a long perspective—long enough to dispel all glamour and leave the critic's gaze quite keen and cold. If Mme. de Sévigné does still withstand the ordeal of modern criticism and analysis, it must be, I think, because her work—one and indivisible in spite of its variety—is at the same time in complete harmony with herself.

For in its essentials human nature changes little from age to age; it is only the fashion of this world that passeth away. Mme. de Sévigné's letters are simply the fullest, most spontaneous, and inevitable expression of her beautiful and beneficent nature.

For the most part the story of human achievement is written in blood and tears. It is a record of conflict—of difficult self-mastery and resolute repression and subordination of competing motives and impulses in the path of the ruling passion or purpose. Often the complete evolution of the special faculty or talent has implied the maiming of the human creature who has plucked out the right eye, cut off the right hand, in the process. But in Marie de Rabutin-Chantal, Marquise de Sévigné, we are invited, it would seem, to contemplate an exception to this rule. Her talent flowered in an age and a civilization to all intents as remote from ours as those of Greece, and yet her work remains a legacy of joy to many generations, blooming with undimmed luster, across the centuries. A legacy of joy, and perhaps a parable also, in which, if she interpret it aright, may lie a hint of admonition to our strenuous modern woman, with her elaborate programme of work and play, her too insistent claim for recognition, her slightly strident protest against the injustice and indifference of mankind.

To Marie de Rabutin, at least, literary excellence, literary glory, came not as the reward of painful effort, of laborious days and sleepless nights. She simply lived; and all the years that ripened and sweetened and deepened her nature and enriched her experience did, by the same mysterious process, develop her powers of expression. Her gifts of insight and sympathy, of humor and emotion, grew ever toward a completeness in which the woman's personality and her genius were blended into a harmonious whole as inseparable as the color and fragrance of the lilies of the field. And these, it is said, toil not, neither do they spin, yet they unfold into a perfectness of beauty to which even Solomon in all his glory could not attain.

FLORENCE LEFTWICH RAVENEL.